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ABSTRACT

A pragmatic approach may be used in teaching undergraduate courses in political communication. The design of such a course takes account of departmental, university, and community contexts, and focuses on the following six approaches: single figure or single issue; genre; media exploitation; print media; electronic media; and candidate image. The 1980 presidential campaign can be used as a situation for studying such media as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, posters, bumper stickers, leaflets, personal appearances, speeches, rallies, and local groups. Activities for such a course might include studying network special news reports and inviting candidates to present personally their views on various issues. (DF)

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TEACHING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION DESIGNED FOR UNDERGRADUATES: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

by

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TEACHING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION
DESIGNED FOR UNDERGRADUATES: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

INTRODUCTION:

As the title indicates, I take a pragmatic approach to the teaching of undergraduate courses in "Political Communication." This means that I analyze my total environment--my department, university, community, state, students, available resources, and use this information to help me design political communication courses that match student needs. The rest of the terms in the title may appear to be self-explanatory, although I continue to experience some definitional ambiguity with the term "political." Certainly, the word "political" would refer to the strategies and techniques of various campaigns designed to influence voting behavior. But, upon reflection, the consumer movement, Equal Rights Amendment, abortion reform, and other organized efforts are clearly "political." Finally, when I use the term "communication" I mean the broad sense of sharing information verbally and nonverbally in order to influence, so that "communication" and "persuasion" are synonymous and may be used interchangeably.

DEPARTMENTAL CONTEXT:

The Department of Communication on the Duluth campus of the University of Minnesota is an undergraduate program with seven faculty and one hundred fifty communication majors. In order to retain flexibility in course offerings, special topic courses and seminars were designed to focus on specific political communication events. Thus, when it became evident that a course should reflect a certain event (e.g., the Ford/Carter Debates), there were several options as to the type of course, level, and presentational approach.

After the proper course, level, and approach has been selected, two or three colleagues can be asked to review choices and offer suggestions for improvement. After incorporating some changes, it is useful to briefly describe the course so that everyone is aware of the new course. This description can be in the form of a one-page memorandum to the communication faculty and students. Typical content headings include the course number, full course title, number of credits, textbook, meeting times, place, instructor, prerequisites, short description of the purpose of the course, description of teaching methods employed, and a description of the major kinds of assignments and their relative grade values. The information in the one-page memorandum is generally the same descriptive information that should be made available to students who register for the course. Thus, by distributing this information ahead of time, a bit of advertising is accomplished. Although some professors may be reluctant to advertise a new course, most should be willing to prepare the one-page description. Your colleagues could be asked to announce the availability of the new course in their classes. Colleagues in other departments such as political science and social psychology should also be informed. In our department, communication majors have formed their own Communication Club, so the course descriptions can be placed in student hands rather quickly. In addition, the one-page description can be submitted to the school newspaper, the school radio and television station, and the university's public relations office for an appropriate announcement. Finally, the description can be prominently posted on bulletin boards.

Open discussion of the new course in political communication within the communication faculty is encouraged. Other communication courses can emphasize elements of political communication by providing political illustrations from recent or current political campaigns.

Naturally, the most important element in the departmental context is the student. Informal discussions with student leaders can help make the course in political communication match the students' needs and interests. Students who have particularly

strong interests and abilities can be encouraged to participate in independent study with a professor with similar interests. And, a few of the very best students can be encouraged to participate in political communication internships. The internships allow the student to become actively involved in some organized political effort at the school, community, city, state, regional, or federal level. Finally, students can be questioned through traditional research strategies such as the survey questionnaire to assess their needs and attitudes. Combining these informal and formal needs assessment measures will yield useful data that can be used in a very practical way to design the political communication courses that match student needs.

UNIVERSITY CONTEXT:

Like many other universities, the University of Minnesota, Duluth has both a Department of Communication and a Department of Political Science. The Department of Communication frequently will focus on some aspects of political communication strategies and techniques within courses labeled "Public Communication," "Persuasion," "Mass Communication and Society," "Organizational Communication" and others. Likewise, Political Science departments frequently offer courses which focus on communicative behavior. For example, courses are offered which focus on the techniques of local, state, national, and international political campaigns (e.g., nuclear energy), political candidate "image" studies and mass communication, inter-governmental organizations, and others. Some typical Political Science courses are labeled "Organizational Theory," "Political Theory," "Political Change," "Problems of Public Policy," "Politics and Psychology" and others. These descriptions generally match the course offerings of many universities. There will always be some concepts, theories, and subject matter so broad that two or more academic departments cover different aspects from their own particular perspectives. Often overlooked, however, are the opportunities for joint efforts. By agreeing to exchange lectures, both political science courses and political communication courses benefit.

The university context can also support the Political Communication courses through direct or indirect course costs. For example, the University of Minnesota has an Educational Development Program which supports innovative approaches in teaching undergraduates. Our campus also has a Learning Resource Center where appropriate films, film strips, video tapes, audio tapes, records and other non-print materials can be organized to enrich the courses.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT:

Most of my students agree that they learn more when the classroom experience is reinforced by application in the real world. Specific assignments can range from simple observation and analysis of a political meeting to a concentrated internship within a local political campaign. The community can be used effectively to demonstrate the realities of political campaigns to students. Speakers of opposing viewpoints can be invited to present their views to the political communication class. The involvement of students into community efforts adds the elements of reality and relevancy to the undergraduate course. And, student involvement in community organizations helps to bridge town-gown divisions.

These general suggestions about the fundamental contexts of the department, the university, and the community will prove worthy of careful consideration regardless of when and where political communication courses are offered. However, to retain the pragmatic framework of this article, general suggestions are now set aside for the consideration of specific suggestions. Therefore, the following describes the approach and perspective of one trained in communication who is interested in designing university courses in what may be labeled "Political Communication." Six approaches are briefly described: (1) single figure or single issue approach, (2) genre approach, (3) media exploitation, (4) print media, (5) electronic media, and (6) candidate image.

THE SINGLE FIGURE OR SINGLE ISSUE APPROACH:

Perhaps the most common approach in communication courses dealing with political communication is to select one political figure or a group of political figures' relationship with a common issue and concentrate on their political speeches. Today, with mechanical reproduction equipment so readily available, collections of political discourse can be obtained. Thus, printed matter remains the most often used method because of the relative ease and economy. The instructor can design the course around a single figure (e.g., a President) or collect some significant speeches around a particular issue (e.g., legalization of abortion) or provide opposing views centering on some organized effort (e.g., the Equal Rights Amendment--pro and con).

An advantageous feature of the single figure or single issue focus is that the instructor can design course materials within either the historical or contemporary setting. Thus, students can be exposed to political figures and issues developed through American history or contemporary figures and issues. And, before someone suggests that this is the traditional rhetorical analysis approach, let me add that historical/critical, empirical/experimental, as well as a variety of analytical methods can be used to focus on political discourse.

As a group, successful politicians are dependent upon effective communication skills employed in the numerous statements, interviews, conferences, conventions, and speeches that dominate political life. Clearly, public discourses of Presidents, Vice-Presidents, members of congress, governors, mayors and other political leaders provide a variety of materials for analysis that match the variety of university students' interests. Thus, the public discourses of prominent political figures is typically an integral part of courses in political communication.

THE GENRE APPROACH:

Another approach often taken in political communication courses is to focus attention on a political genre, i.e., a collection or series of political discourses

having common subject matter, but different speakers (e.g., nomination and acceptance speeches), discourses having a common form, but different speakers (e.g., presidential inaugurals, state of the union addresses, press conferences), and a series of speeches having both common subject matter and the same speaker (e.g., Carter's Energy speeches). The genre approach allows the instructor great flexibility in the assignment of course papers and projects that fit the needs of students. For example, such papers and projects can range from the complete freedom of individually student-selected topics to the instructor-controlled individual project or the instructor could divide the class members into groups (e.g., Group "A" - Carter's Energy speeches; Group "B" - presidential inaugural addresses; Group "C" - nomination speeches; etc.).

THE MASS MEDIA APPROACH:

The interrelationship of political success and the effective utilization of the mass media is obvious to everyone, but this relationship dominates the instructional strategies of communication instructors who teach political communication courses. Although the specific focus may be on the "print media" of newspapers, magazines, and books or the "electronic media" of radio, television, telephone, and film, these are generally considered within the same course.

Some of the many significant issues which tend to cement the relationship of politics and the media include (1) freedom of the press, (2) public access to media use, (3) censorship (both internally by the media industry and externally by government), (4) objectivity in the coverage of political events, and (5) the effects of media exposure in political campaigns.

PRINT MEDIA:

In terms of print media, the most frequent focus in political communication courses is the large daily newspapers. The pages of Journalism Quarterly and Public Opinion Quarterly are generally filled with studies of coverage, bias, and influence

of the major newspapers on the American political process. The association between national political leaders and the press has always been an adversary relationship and politicians throughout American history have been critical of the press. And, the complexity of the mediational process has created doubt as to the probabilities of message content being effectively transmitted from a national political figure to his ultimate national audience. For example, a political speech is covered by press reporters, who submit their reactions ("on the scene reports") to editors, who edit or "clip" the material in consideration of its significance, availability of space, and other factors. Then finally the public receives a press report, but since the content has been subjected to the mediational process, there is the constant danger that the "message" will become changed, altered, modified, or distorted one way or another. A typical assignment in my classes is to have students listen to a political speech, read press reports of that same speech in two or more newspapers, and then report effects discovered that they believe can be attributed to the mediational process. The rationale for this approach is that during the mediational process, newspapers and newspaper reporters in our modern society perform various functions which in turn act to "shape" the ultimate message received by the public. Marshall McLuhan argues that how the message is presented determines the message, i.e., "the medium is the message."

One assignment that has proven successful in previous classes is to ask students to compare the coverage of the same speech, rally, or any other specific political event by two different sources. For example, one could compare the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune newspapers, local newspapers, and college newspapers, etc. Specific content variables could include the length or amount of space, the placement (front page vs. submerged copy), the number of stories devoted to the topic, accuracy of story, and, if the topic is a speech, the number of quoted and paraphrased material, etc. A variation of this assignment, if one is considering newspapers,

would be to compare the editorial position taken by two different newspapers about a political candidate or a political issue.

Thus, this teaching approach's emphasis on the mediational process results from a realistic assessment of how Americans learn about political events, political figures, and political speeches.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA:

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats on radio proved effective as mass media appeals to the national public, American politics has been completely enamoured with the magic of electronic media. Even today, radio is still an essential element in political campaigns. Radio spot advertising, network interviews, and "talk shows" are still considered vital to modern campaigns. Interestingly, the "talk shows" also permit the use of radio combined with "live" (5-10 second tape delay) broadcast of telephone conversations. Often overlooked by researchers, the telephone contact with the public is essential to "get out the vote." Most radio stations have personnel in "community relations departments" who can be invited into the classroom to give students an inside view of how today's politicians utilize radio in modern campaigns.

But television clearly remains the most popular modern choice of politicians and television is consistently the most popular focus of student interests in political communication courses. By using video-taped presentations of significant televised "media events," lively classroom discussion is almost guaranteed. In addition, this focus stimulates student curiosity about the influence and effects of television in modern politics. Certainly, where possible, the selected use of televised materials via video-tape is recommended. In short, to teach effectively about television and politics, use television as employed by real politicians.

MEDIA EXPLOITATION:

Media exploitation is one of the most stimulating discussion topics because the subject matter is relevant to the reality outside the classroom. For example, one

of the criticisms of the mass media generally and television specifically is that the presence of television camera crews (mobile units) either causes radical behavior change in public demonstrations or that such presence increases behavior designed to attract and maintain coverage. The controversy is between those who claim television induces confrontation strategies and violence and those who claim that television is the servant, attending events as a sort of public eye for citizens. In order to introduce the exploitation of media as a topic in political communication, a series of discussion questions are presented to students. Although it is evident that there are more good questions than good answers, the following questions generally stimulate lively discussion: Does the very presence of various media people and media equipment create an atmosphere which stimulated, encouraged, or enhanced the "target event?" What is the relationship between the presence of the media and the event being covered? If the presence of the media does affect the event being covered, what would be the means of solving the problem? What ethical questions are involved? Who decides what news will be covered and what will be ignored? What role does the consumer play in controlling the media coverage? To what extent are we influenced by the media? Does exposure to sex, violence, crime, drugs, profanity, and negative social behavior cause negative behavior to be increased or decreased? Who should be the "watch dog" for the media? Doesn't any control risk limiting the First Amendment freedom of expression?

Another popular focus, particularly when considering media manipulation for political advantage, is "candidate image." The instructor can easily incorporate much of the contemporary literature on nonverbal communication (e.g., the props, clothing, setting, cosmetic make-up, campaign buttons, posters, leaflets, billboards, bumper stickers, tee shirts, etc.). The basic perspective operating here is the candidate for political office is treated more and more like a product for sale. As a product in the marketplace, public relations and advertising professionals take over the care and feeding of the candidate. And, as Dan Nimmo and Robert L. Savage's

Candidates and Their Images points out, the manipulations often result in the confusion of style and substance. A major method used to present the candidate's image is spot advertising. Interestingly, spot advertising was a format originally designed by Madison Avenue to sell commercial products, but when adapted to the needs of the political figure, it is difficult to ignore the candidate's image as being pre-packaged, commercialized as a product, and sold to the voters.

THE CAMPAIGN APPROACH:

Perhaps the most natural thing to study in a Political Communication course is a real political campaign. The 1980 presidential campaign will provide many opportunities to focus on specific elements. It can be predicted with confidence that again mass media will play a central role.

The focus on contemporary political communication techniques in the 1980 campaign provides students the opportunity to study the variety of mediums and settings including television, radio, newspaper, magazine, billboards, posters, bumper stickers, leaflets, personal appearances, speeches, rallies, local organizational groups, and so on. Naturally, the relevance desired by many students will be satisfied because of the "here and now" focus. Network special reports on "Campaign 80" can be assigned to be watched live or such programs can be video-taped at our Learning Resource Center for later in-class use. If the timing of the course coincides with local political election campaign, it is possible to invite candidates to personally present their views on various issues. Two or three class members could approach the various candidates in advance to work out the specific arrangements. And, if the instructor and students are willing to open up such a meeting to the whole university, the candidates are usually happy to cooperate. Of course, since the "student vote" in some communities involves substantial numbers, candidates will frequently agree to meet informally with students either in a "coffee hour" or at a meeting of the regular class members who have worked to provide the candidates the exposure they desire among student voters.

The value of such involvement of your students in local politics can be substantial. In many cases it will be the first time they have personally met a candidate, listened to opposing views on identical issues, and generally become personally involved in our democratic political process.

SUMMARY:

There are obviously many approaches to teaching political communication to undergraduates. I have described what I call a "pragmatic approach" which has been successful for me. Considerable emphasis was given to the three contexts: (1) the departmental context, (2) the university context, and (3) the community context. Although obviously important for consideration when beginning any course, these three contexts have proved particularly useful in the design of political communication courses.

Ultimately, however, one can only describe generally useful approaches for someone else to consider. Perhaps this is because teaching remains such a private, individualistic endeavor. But the five approaches recommended here have been tested in the classroom for almost ten years with positive results: (1) the single figure or single issue approach, (2) the genre approach, (3) the mass media approach (print media and electronic media), (4) media exploitation, and (5) the campaign approach. If more professors teach more undergraduate students more effectively and if this "pragmatic approach" proves useful to others, then the purpose of my efforts here will have been achieved.